



# The Singh Twins

## *Jallianwala: Repression and Retribution*

### 2019

Manchester Museum  
The University of Manchester

## **The Singh Twins: Selected Biography**

**The Singh Twins are British artists with an international reputation whose contribution to contemporary art has been recognised at the highest level. In 2010 they were made Honorary Citizens of their home city of Liverpool. In 2011 they were each awarded MBE's from HRH Queen Elizabeth II and in 2015, Honorary Doctorates of Fine Art from the University of Chester. Their award-winning work, which explores largely hidden colonial histories and challenges generally accepted, Eurocentric perceptions of heritage and identity in art and society, was cited by Sir Simon Schama in his BBC documentary series 'The Face of Britain', as representing the artistic face of modern Britain. Major exhibitions include solos shows at London's National Portrait Gallery and Delhi's National Gallery of Modern Art. Their most recent solo exhibition ('Slaves of Fashion: New Works by The Singh Twins') attracted over 105,000 visitors at Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery alone, where it launched in 2018. The series received significant media interest including profiles by North West TV's, 'Inside Out', 'The One Show' and a regional documentary commissioned for the BBC's 'Civilisations' series. The exhibition, which involved a close collaboration with Professor Kate Marsh of the University of Liverpool, was shortlisted for the 'Eastern Eye Arts Culture and Theatre Awards'. In 2018 The Twins were commissioned by Royal Collection Trust to create a new work for temporary display at The Queen's Gallery Buckingham Palace.**

**The Twins' artistic response to the Centenary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, is the latest addition to their 'Slaves of Fashion' series.**

## The centre panel

This artwork represents the center panel of a new triptych artwork by The Singh Twins which commemorates the 100th anniversary of the Amritsar or Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919. It provokes questions about the nature of Empire whilst carrying a message for our modern times - presenting a unique creative response to a largely hidden episode of British Rule in India, described by Churchill as, "a monstrous event" and "without parallel in the modern history of the British Empire".

The artwork's uniqueness lies in its depth of representation of this important event in British Indian history: one which places it within a wider context of global history, politics and state oppression and reveals its contemporary relevance - not least the ongoing controversies surrounding repeated calls both within and outside the UK Government, for a formal apology.

The 'event' referred to by Churchill, appears as the main focus of the artwork. This depicts the moment on 13th April, 1919, when Reginald Dyer (a General of the British Raj) ordered his troops to open fire, without warning or provocation, on a peaceful demonstration of un-armed Indian civilians in the city of Amritsar, Punjab, in northern India. The crowd had gathered on the occasion of a major festival (Vaisakhi) in an enclosed public space known as Jallianwala Bagh, to protest the recent passing of laws restricting Indian rights (known as the Rowlatt Acts) and the arrest of anti-Rowlatt Act Indian leaders. Dyer's display of 'Imperial might' killed hundreds and injured thousands - amongst them, women and children.

As details around the artwork reveal, whilst Dyer's actions divided opinion in India and Britain, the massacre and subsequent 'reign of terror' through the imposition of martial law in Punjab (also depicted in the artwork) united India's diverse communities in a new sense of Nationalism and outrage towards the Raj to become a major turning point in India's Independence movement. The artwork further emphasises how the motives, methods and unremorseful attitude of Dyer (shared by his supporters) towards the massacre of innocent civilians whom he described as 'mutineers', reflected an established mindset of Imperial superiority, duty and righteousness which harked back to the Indian rebellion of 1857 and the style of excessive,

exemplary punishment meted out in retribution against Sepoys and civilians alike.

In the bottom register of the artwork, newspaper articles inspired by historical reports of the time, suggest how repressive measures in India and particular Punjab, served British aims to maintain control of India as the 'jewel in the crown' and betrayed the loyalty and sacrifices made by Indians in WWI. Next to these, are depictions of the 1770 Boston Massacre and Manchester's Peterloo Massacre of 1819 which position Jallianwala as part of an ongoing history of state violence against civilian protests in Britain and its colonies.

The massacre is framed by an arch composed of decorative architectural features from Amritsar's historic houses and Harmandir Sahib (The Golden Temple) representing the city's historical wealth and status as a commercial and spiritual centre. To the right, General Dyer commands his troops, donning a length of saffron cloth and sword of honour inscribed with the words "Saviour of the Punjab": both referencing accounts of the tokens of appreciation he is said to have received from the then, British appointed head of Harmandir Sahib and the House of Lords respectively. To the left, is Annie Besant, the London born social reformer and political activist who co-founded the India Home Rule League in 1916 with Indian nationalist leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak (portrayed on her placard) and became the first female President of the Indian National Congress in 1917. This imagery represents India's growing mood of discontent under the British Raj and the awakening of a national consciousness that shaped the political climate of Punjab and the events of April, 1919. The Indian paisley and Irish shamrock motifs on Besant's dress denote her work in championing the cause of both Indian and Irish self-government, as well as the affiliation between the plight of Indians and the Irish - as two peoples suffering under and struggling for freedom from repressive British rule. In the distance we see buildings from key locations in Punjab outside Amritsar (namely, Lahore, Kasur and Gujranwala) where civil unrest and protests against the Rowlatt Act and later, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, were violently quashed.

The key themes outlined above, as well as further narratives explored through the artwork, draw on The Singh Twins' personal research and response to published academic writings and historical documents.

Much of the iconography used is inspired by and reinterprets imagery sourced from private and online archival collections.

## **The left and right panels: Summary**

The artworks displayed left and right of the centre piece are the final two panels of *The Singh Twins'*, 3 part (triptych) artwork offering a creative response to the Centenary of the Jallianwala or Amritsar massacre, which took place during British rule under orders of Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer on the festival of Vaisakhi, 1919 in the North-West province of Punjab, India.

Whilst the central panel (launched earlier this year at Manchester Museum) focuses on the massacre itself, these new works largely explore the historical context, aftermath and legacies of this event whilst celebrating two key figures who responded to this major turning point in Indo-British colonial history in very different ways. Namely, Udham Singh (who avenged the oppression of his countrymen under British Rule some 21 years later by assassinating the then acting Lieutenant Governor of Punjab Sir Michael O'Dwyer at Caxton Hall, London on March 30th, 1940) and Mahatma Gandhi for whom the massacre was a wake up call - exposing the 'true face of Empire': a revelation which changed his attitude towards the Raj and led him to intensify his campaign for Swaraj (or home rule) - triggering the beginning of the end of British colonial rule in India.

These two latest additions to *The Singh Twins'* triptych were officially unveiled on the 31st July: The very day that Udham Singh was executed by the British as a criminal for murder, at Pentonville Prison and on which he is now officially honoured in India as a National Hero of India's Freedom Movement. The artworks will be on display until 2nd October, which marks the 150th anniversary of Gandhi's birth this year.

## The left panel

The left panel of The Singh Twin's triptych focuses on the historical context and circumstances leading up to the Jallianwala massacre.

Central to the composition is a tree composed of flowers and birds symbolising a British Raj built on greed, trickery and deception, conquest and theft - (namely, Alpine Auricular, Clematis and Thorn Apple and the Dalhousie and Magpie respectively). Interspersed with these are sprigs of flowering Hop which, as a symbol of injustice, represent the plight of India's people.

Left of the tree is a scene reinterpreting a Victorian painting (by Edward Armitage) of Britannia slaying a Bengal tiger. Titled 'Retribution', the painting symbolically represents the putting down of what the British described as the Sepoy or Indian Mutiny of 1857: an event that shook the might of the Empire and resulted in the transfer of power in India from the East India Company to the British Crown. The Singh Twins' reinterpretation of this painting, together with other details within their artwork serve to show how the atrocities committed in Punjab in 1919, revealed an Imperial mindset of colonial superiority, self-righteousness and use of excessive, exemplary punishment that harked back to the Indian Mutiny when retribution was meted out indiscriminately against thousands of Indians ('mutinous' sepoys and civilians alike) and justified by a sense of duty to protect the Empire. The Bengal tiger represents the North-West region of India which, together with Punjab, became a center of anti-British, revolutionary, activity following the much resented 'divide and rule' policy applied by Britain through the partition of Bengal in 1905.

Elsewhere we see imagery exemplifying some of the other causes of Indian discontent with British rule in India that were a precursor to Jallianwala. Namely, the deliberate destruction of India's craft industries; British interference with Indian religious traditions (especially through Christian missionary activity); the introduction of laws that curtailed the basic human rights of Indians and failed to treat Indians equally as subjects of the British Empire in India and abroad; Britain's failure to reward the loyalty and sacrifices of Indians during WWI; the introduction of taxes and agricultural and trade policies that resulted in famine and poverty and forced Indians to become

indentured labourers for plantations in British colonies in Africa and the Caribbean and, finally, the expansion of the British Empire in India through annexation and legislation known as the 'doctrine of lapse' which met with resistance amongst the ruling classes. The latter is represented within a vignette depicting the Indian warrior queen Rani Jhansi defending her kingdom in vain from the army of the British East India Company in 1858. In the landscape to her right, we see the city of Lucknow - representing the princely state of Oudh which came under Company rule in 1856.

In the upper part of the panel, we see the figure of a shackled 'Mother India' - the personification of a land exploited, oppressed and enslaved by British commercial interests and longing for freedom. She represents the growing sense of Indian Nationalism that developed during the early 20th Century as a result of oppressive colonial British Rule. The colours and decorative motifs on her blouse along with her jewels symbolise the wealth of India before colonial conquest. Her sari is inscribed with extracts from a poetic tribute to Khudiram Bose - the Bengali revolutionary who became one of the first and youngest martyrs to the cause of India's Freedom Movement.

## The right panel

Udham Singh dominates the upper half of the right panel which is dedicated to exploring the aftermath and legacies of Jallianwala. Sharped-suited, armed with the gun with which he assassinated O'Dwyer, and a passport bearing the many identities he assumed whilst planning his revenge, he grasps a clump of earth soaked with the blood of his countrymen. He is enthroned and haloed in a manner befitting his status in India as 'Shaheed-i-Azam' or 'great martyr' to India's Independence, whilst a noose representing the manner of his execution looms behind him. To Udham's left, a newspaper page reveals how the many hundreds killed and injured at Jallianwala, as well as the wider people of Punjab who were made to suffer under harsh martial law at that time, found a champion in the figure of Irish born, British Journalist, Benjamin Horniman who, as Editor of the Bombay Chronicle, broke the story to the world despite a press ban. Reading around the newspaper, we learn how Horniman was exiled from India, whilst his Indian reporter was imprisoned for this act of defiance; how Britain's official enquiry (Hunter Commission) into the atrocities committed in Punjab

was a whitewash; how the honouring of Dyer by British appointed heads of the Sikh's Golden Temple (Harmandir Sahib) in Amritsar would lead to major reforms and anti British agitation within the Sikh community; how Jallianwala led to revolutionary activity amongst the Indian youth; how contemporary reports likened Jallianwala to Manchester's Peterloo massacre; how the perpetrator of the Amritsar massacre (Brigadier-General Dyer) would be plagued by a guilty conscience whilst his superior (Michael O'Dwyer) became a celebrity figure in Britain boasting about his handling of Punjab under martial rule. and how a young Udham Singh vowed to seek revenge.

To the right of Udham Singh, another newspaper carries a headline about the assassination of O'Dwyer and subsequent arrest of Mahomed Singh Azad - the name chosen and given by Udham Singh as an anti-colonial statement representing freedom gained (in defiance of British policies of 'divide and rule') through the unity of India's different religious communities. Others stories within the same broadsheet, recount how the retribution Udham Singh meted out against O'Dwyer received mixed responses against a changing political climate: Condemned in pre-Independent India by members of the Indian National Congress Gandhi and Nehru as an 'act of insanity' which they feared might impact negatively on Indo-British talks around the future of India taking place at that time. But hailed in WWII Germany and post Independent India as the legitimate act of a freedom fighter and Shaheed (martyr). Elsewhere we read how M15 and British India Intelligence failed to detect Udham's assassination plot, as well as his prior links with a major anti-colonial revolutionary organisation known as the Gadar Movement. And how measures were put in place to depoliticise his actions by dissociating them from the atrocity of Jallianwala.

Below Udham Singh we see the figure of Gandhi marching on the road to home rule through Swadesh (self-reliance or 'make in India' campaign). He holds a spinning wheel symbolising a return to cottage industries, whilst burning textile and other boycotted British consumer product labels on a bonfire of imported Lancashire cotton goods. Opposite Gandhi is a reinterpretation of Britannia revealing the 'true face' of Empire and the 'evils' of a British colonialism founded on the exploitation and oppression of India as well as other colonised peoples. Her traditional mount (the lion) is replaced with a crocodile representing the 'beast of colonialism': a symbolic convention borrowed from India's early 20th century, patriotic poster art.

The events of Punjab 1919 contributed to the rise in anti British feeling, resentment and distrust - leading to an increase in revolutionary activity and a growing sense of Indian Nationalism that culminated in a campaign of mass civil disobedience forcing Britain to reconsider the political future of India. This is represented by the two posters and the smaller trade card carried by Gandhi. The posters pay tribute to Neta Ji, leader of the Indian National Army; the Quit India Movement and the program of civilian strikes and British Indian Navy mutinies that posed a threat to the stability of the Raj during WWII. The trade card depicts the opening of the Round table Conference of 1930, which was established to discuss the future governance of India.

A tree represents the unity of India's three main religious communities through its flowers (Lotus for Hindus, Marigolds for Sikhs and Roses for Muslims). A peacock (the National bird of India) stands proudly on one branch, while a butterfly adorned with the colours of Independent India's flag, signifies the country's re-birth as a free nation in 1947. Below the tree is an image of the sandstone flame monument erected in memory of the victims of Jallianwala. A silver urn engraved with Udham Singh's name alludes to the added significance of the memorial garden, as the place where some of his ashes were preserved after his body was exhumed from Pentonville prison and repatriated at India's request, in 1974. A lotus denoting the pure soul in traditional Indian symbolism and iconography, floats on the surface of the monument's blue pool, whose reflection offers a glimpse of the horrors of 1919. Other details beneath the tree represent how the story of Jallianwala has been presented, paid tribute to and explored through popular culture (film, dance, music, art, exhibitions) and academic research in recent times - including books which The Singh Twins drew upon as part of their initial research for the triptych. Quotes and verses from an earlier time float within decorative colophons on a river of blood that flows across the bottom of the artwork. Two of these, selected from an epic poem titled, 'Khooni Vaisakhi' (Bloody Vaisakhi) written in 1920, offer a unique and touching, personal eye witness account of events relating to the massacre that resonate with key themes explored throughout The Singh Twins' triptych. Either side of the tree, two vignettes depict episodes and personalities of Indian history who influenced Udham Singh's life and, or, who were themselves influenced in some way by political changes associated with the events of Punjab 1919. To the left, we see Maharaja Duleep Singh, last ruler of Punjab who was deposed as a child, separated from his

mother and bought up as an English gentleman after his kingdom was annexed by the East India Company in 1849. The scene recalls a chapter in Anita Anand's 2019 book 'The Patient Assassin', which describes how Udham Singh was reduced to tears and enraged by Britain's treatment of Duleep Singh. To the right, are fellow Indian freedom fighters Bhagat Singh and Lala Lajput Rai along with figures representing the Gadar Movement, the SGPC and Akali (Sikh anti-British Raj agitation movements) and the Khilafat (Indian Muslim movement).

**Talking about the latest additions to their Jallianwala commemorative artwork, The Singh Twins say:**

"As well as making important episodes in shared British Indian history that have helped shaped the society we live in today accessible to a wider public, our artworks carry lessons for our modern times - not least, the vital role that journalists and the media play in exposing atrocities, giving a voice to the voiceless and ensuring that the right to justice for those oppressed in the world is fought for and preserved".

"The artworks also raise questions about the nature of Empire - challenging the notion held by some that the British Raj and colonialism were largely a benevolent and civilizing force for good that brought positive changes to those who were colonised."

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